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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRETORIA 000610

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SUBJECT: KZN ANC COMING TO TERMS WITH ZUMA'S TRIAL BUT
STILL EXPECTING HIM TO BECOME RSA PRESIDENT

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Donald Teitelbaum. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Members of the top three political parties in KwaZulu-Natal province, ANC President Jacob Zuma's stronghold, shared conflicting opinions with PolOff and Durban PolAsst on Zuma's performance thus far as ANC President and his future. Like other opposition parties, the Inkatha Freedom Party and the Democratic Alliance do not believe that Zuma will ever become national President, while provincial ANC officials maintain that the party still stands by its resolution that the ANC President, currently Jacob Zuma, will be their presidential candidate in 2009. Support for Zuma within his home province, however, seems somewhat tempered by the sober (and late) realization that Zuma's legal troubles may be insurmountable. That said, even with the court case pending, the person most likely to be the next President of South Africa remains Jacob Zuma. END SUMMARY.

OPPOSITION BELIEVES ZUMA WILL NOT ASCEND TO PRESIDENCY

2. (C) PolOff and Durban PolAsst spoke to both ANC and opposition officials in ANC President Jacob Zuma's home province, KwaZulu-Natal, to better gauge impressions of Zuma during his first couple of months in office as well as his future. Democratic Alliance (DA) Caucus Leader in Durban's Municipal Council, John Steenhuisen, told PolOff and Durban PolAsst on 13 March that he does not believe ANC President Jacob Zuma will be the ANC's candidate for national president next year because of the inevitability of a criminal conviction. Steenhuisen said NPA officials have told him that, while waiting for Zuma's trial to begin on 4 August, they are continuing their investigation, going as far back as when Zuma was MEC in KwaZulu-Natal, and that "new charges are being added daily." Consequently, he believes that the ANC will nominate ANC Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe as their candidate for national president, but keep Zuma on as ANC President until the verdict is reached. When asked how this would fit with the ANC's resolution that the ANC President will automatically be the ANC's presidential candidate in national elections, he simply replied, "The ANC will just change it." He also believes that Zuma will willingly accept Motlanthe's nomination because Zuma, as ANC President, would retain control of the party and state through Luthuli House.

3. (C) Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) Provincial Chairman

Mtomuhle Khawula and Provincial Secretary Sibusiso Buthelezi on 10 March told us that they believe Zuma will be convicted before national elections next April and that Motlanthe will be the ANC's presidential candidate. Nicki Lucas, the IFP's communications and media director, however, took a more cautious approach on saying she is in "wait and see mode." She added that she is afraid the trial "will cheapen the political debate in the run-up to elections, but will test South African institutions and the Constitution." (NOTE: The IFP claims to have roughly 500,000 members, 85 percent of whom are in KwaZulu-Natal. Party officials do not believe that Zuma will take any votes away from the traditionally ethnic Zulu political party, pointing out that Zuma is not a new factor and that even Zuma's hometown is controlled by the Qnew factor and that even Zuma's hometown is controlled by the IFP. They also believe that ANC divisions will help them win back control of the province, which they lost to the ANC in 2004. END NOTE)

ANC INTRODUCES CAVEATS

14. (C) ANC Chief Whip in the KZN Provincial Legislature Cyril Xaba (known to be in the Mbeki camp) said on 11 March that "Zuma will be the ANC's candidate unless courts intervene," later clarifying that Zuma would have to be found guilty before the election for him not to be the ANC's candidate. He also said he is certain ANC members will respect the court's decision, saying that Zuma himself will soon start spreading this message. When asked about the contradiction and potential impact, however, of Zuma's claims that he is a victim of a political conspiracy on the court's credibility, he pointed out that Zuma is not attracting the same crowds at the courthouse one saw during Zuma's previous court appearances.

15. (C) ANC Youth League (ANCYL) Provincial Chairperson

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Nhlakanipho Ntombela (pro-Zuma) on 12 March echoed Xaba's statements exactly, repeating the oddly turned phrase, "unless the court intervenes." He also stressed that if Zuma is found guilty before the election, the ANCYL will accept the decision peacefully. He also reminded PolOffs that in the South African court system, one is "innocent until proven guilty." As for Zuma's successor, Ntombela would not comment, saying only that the ANC would have to regroup at that time.

IN THE MEANTIME...

16. (C) Both ANC officials stressed that to date the party is satisfied with Zuma's performance. "He has never let us down," Ntombela said. As for Zuma's recent statements contradicting core ANC policies such as affirmative action and the death penalty, Xaba seemed less forgiving than Ntombela, but neither one seemed too concerned. Ntombela pointed out that Zuma "listens to the people" and that Zuma was simply acknowledging what South Africans want to talk about. He even managed to give Zuma's comments on liberalizing labor laws a positive spin, pointing out that COSATU quickly disagreed. "Zuma gives tripartite alliance partners a voice, which Mbeki didn't." Xaba was more realistic, brushing aside Zuma's tendency to put his foot in his mouth as business as usual. Xaba pointed out that Zuma said similar things in the runup to Polokwane, but that the ANC "let it slide." However, he mentioned that one can see the ANC is now disciplining Zuma. When asked if the ANC was concerned that Zuma was undermining ANC policies, he replied with a religious overtone that the "ANC is bigger than the sum of its members; ANC policy is supreme."

17. (C) The DA's Steenhuisen, surprisingly, also had good

things to say about Zuma. He said he has personally met Zuma twice and described him as a "charismatic man with an earthy charm who makes you want to talk to him." The IFP's Lucas agreed that Zuma is charismatic, calling his laugh "infectious," but also warned EmbOffs that "he laughs when he is trying to hide something."

¶8. (C) On a deeper level, however, Steenhuisen confessed that Zuma "lacks serious judgment and surrounds himself with rabid supporters who will end up controlling him." He also assessed that Zuma has made the most obvious political mistake one can make: "he is promising everything to everyone, which he will never be able to live up to." In the end, he thinks Zuma will end up only being able to repay "his most loyal supporters who stood by him when no one else did," especially the ANC Youth League, which stood by Zuma during his rape trial in 2006. He also worries that South Africa's international reputation would suffer under Zuma, wondering out loud how the international community could take South Africa seriously when its President was on trial for corruption. Xaba also said that the ANC realizes how important it is for South Africa to be taken seriously, especially in today's global economy, but again, that "Jacob Zuma is innocent until proven guilty."

COMMENT

¶9. (C) From our conversations with provincial ANC members, it appears that the ANC, at least in KZN, has issued its talking points: Zuma will be the ANC's candidate for national president provided he is not found guilty before elections next year. Though most experts agree it is unlikely Zuma's Qnext year. Though most experts agree it is unlikely Zuma's trial will be concluded by the election on/around April 2009, the ANC (finally) may be bracing itself for an eventual conviction -- a possibility that was not publicly entertained in the lead-up to Polokwane. As a result, ANC members we spoke to appear resigned to the fact that the South African court system -- not the ANC -- may end up making the decision for them. In the event that Zuma is convicted, his core supporters would most likely throw their support behind Motlanthe. However, until that day, having supported Zuma this long and with hopes hanging so high, his supporters still appear willing to wait out the court's decision. For the moment, however, even with the court case pending, the person most likely to be the next President of South Africa remains Jacob Zuma. Until the case begins and we see the direction it takes, he remains the default setting.

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¶10. (C) This message has been coordinated with ConGen Durban.
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